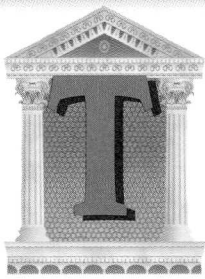


# 5 The Persian Wars



**The Beginning of the War** In the first lesson you learned that there were a number of Greek city-states on the coast of Asia Minor. About 546 B.C. these city-states came under the control of the Persians, who appointed harsh tyrants to rule each city-state.

Around 499 B.C. the city-state of Miletus (mye LEET us) rebelled against Persian rule. The people of Miletus asked the Greeks in other city-states to help them overthrow the Persians. The Spartans refused, but the Athenians agreed to help.

In 498 B.C., the Athenians crossed the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor. They conquered the Persian-controlled city of Sardis. When the other Greek city-states in Asia Minor saw that Athens was victorious, they decided to join in the revolt against the Persians.

The Athenians felt their point had been made, and they went home. Within three years, the Persian king Darius had put down the revolt and regained control of the Greek city-states in Asia Minor.

Even though they had regained control of their empire, the Persians were angry with the Athenians. In 490 B.C. the Persians crossed the Aegean Sea to punish the Athenians.

## **Marathon**

The Athenians and Persians met on the plain at Marathon, about 26 miles from Athens. The Athenians were badly outnumbered, but they decided to

attack. The Greek charge was a success. The Persians broke ranks and fled to their ships, and the Greeks cut them down as they ran. By the end of the battle, more than 6,000 Persians were dead, while only 192 Greeks had fallen.

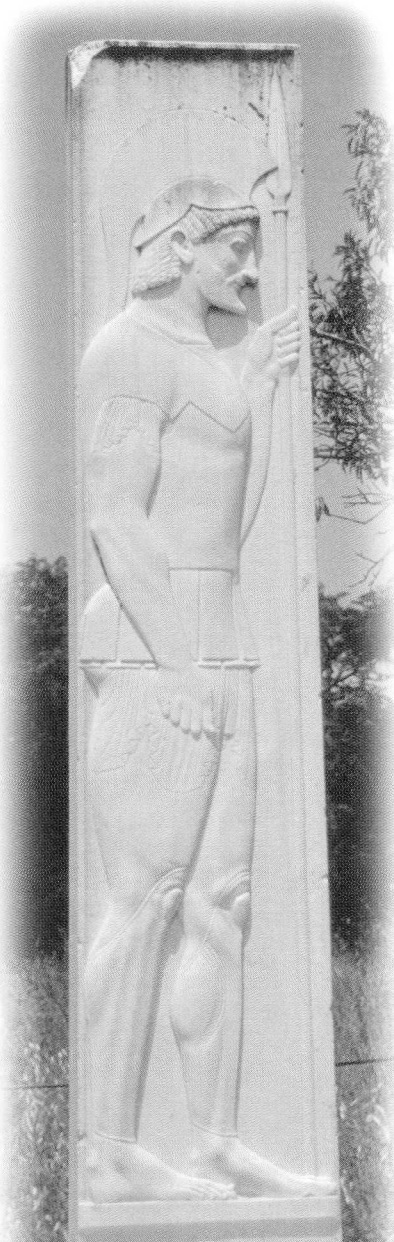
According to legend, the Greeks ordered a messenger to run to Athens and deliver news of the victory. The messenger ran the 26 miles to Athens, gasped out his victory announcement, "Rejoice, we conquer!" and died of exhaustion. Today, we use the word *marathon* to refer to a 26-mile footrace that is run in the modern Olympics.

Marathon was an extremely important battle. Because the Athenians won, they were filled with self-confidence. They began to think that they were the most powerful of all the Greeks.

## **Thermopylae**

The Persians were not yet done with the Athenians. In 480 B.C. another Persian army was dispatched to defeat the Greeks. With an army of more than 100,000 men as well as 600 to 700 ships, the Persian king Xerxes (ZURK seez) (486–465 B.C.) was determined to conquer all of Greece.

*This monument in Marathon commemorates an Athenian warrior who fought there.*



Athens and Sparta put aside their disagreements and united against the Persians. They were joined by a few other city-states. The Greeks had between 200 and 300 ships and an army of 10,000 men. The army was led by King Leonidas (lee AHN uh dus) of Sparta.

The Greeks realized that the longer they could put off a major battle, the better their chances would be. The Greeks decided to delay the Persian army by engaging them at a place called Thermopylae (thur MAHP uh lee), about 75 miles northwest of Athens. Thermopylae was a narrow pass between high cliffs and the sea. Because the pass is so narrow, only part of the huge Persian army could attack at one time, and the Greeks might be able to hold the pass.

Things did not turn out exactly as planned. Leonidas and his troops showed great courage and managed to hold the pass for two days, but a traitor showed the Persians how to use a mountain path to slip around the Greeks. When Leonidas realized what had happened, he ordered the majority of the Greeks to retreat, while he and 300 Spartans stayed behind to hold back the Persian army. All 300 of the Spartans died defending the pass.

## Salamis

The heroism of the Spartan troops slowed the Persian army but did not stop it. Xerxes marched south to Athens and burned the city to the ground. Fortunately, most of the citizens had been warned that Xerxes was coming and had evacuated.

After the burning of Athens, the Persians were set to conquer all of southern Greece. Xerxes decided to lead with his navy. The two fleets clashed near an island called Salamis (SAL uh mihs). The Persians had big ships, but the Greeks knew the waterways better than the Persians did. The Athenian navy lured the Persian fleet into shallow waters. There, the Greek ships rammed and sank the Persian ships. The Greeks had also filled their boats with soldiers, who attacked the men on board the Persian ships. These tactics enabled the Athenian navy to defeat the huge Persian fleet.

Stunned by this unexpected defeat, Xerxes immediately left Greece and sailed home. The next year, 479 B.C., the Spartan general Pausanias (paw SAY nee us) led the Greeks against the Persians in the battle of Plataea (pluh TEE uh). Pausanias won the battle and drove the Persian army out of Greece.

*Based on ancient sources, this nineteenth-century painting shows the Battle of Salamis between the Greeks and the Persians. The Greeks were victorious.*

